

## ***Review Article***

Erberto Lo Bue (ed.) 2010. *Wonders of Lo: the artistic heritage of Mustang*. Vol. 62 (2), *Marg*. Mumbai: Marg Foundation.

### **Christian Luczanits**

A survey of the artistic heritage of Lo or Mustang, a fascinating region of Tibetan culture in north-central Nepal, is long overdue. Despite its cultural and artistic importance, the region so far has largely been treated in travelogues, picture books and only a few detailed historical studies, which also contain the most important benchmarks for the artistic heritage. But while many manuscripts and historical documents of the region received scholarly attention and its fascinating caves continue to be explored archaeologically, its artistic heritage has not yet received the attention it deserves. Despite the fact that Mustang is well known for both artifacts deriving from the region—as apparent from Amy Heller’s contribution in this volume—and the murals, sculptures and other important object preserved on site—these are the focus of most other contributions—very little actually has been studied in greater detail. The present volume of *Marg*, thus, potentially fills an urgent gap. However, from the scholarly perspective I am taking in this review it is rather another picture book with introductory texts of varying quality and little integration with each other. This is to be expected from a group of articles combined in a thematic volume of a journal meant for a more general public. The main value of this publication is that it reminds of the importance of the heritage preserved in Mustang and does give access to previously little or even unpublished material, such as the caves of Chödzung and Könchokling in Upper Mustang.

In his “Introduction to the Cultural History of Lo (Mustang)”, Erberto Lo Bue, who also served as editor of this volume, provides a concise historical overview, essentially summarizing the heritage relevant information from secondary sources. Absent here is a note to the importance of the cultural divide between Upper Mustang, which can be considered of purely Tibetan culture, and the lower regions, which although culturally linked, have some very distinctive cultural traits. Charles Ramble’s study of Te (Tetang) village, a rather extreme example of the culture of Lower Mustang, offers a fascinating account in this regard (Ramble 2007).

The importance of the cultural divide between the upper and lower regions is immediately apparent in the following contribution on “A Tibetan Architecture? The Traditional Buildings of Lo” by John Harrison, who emphasizes the unique character of Te village, essentially a fortress formed by the dwellings of the families living there. Such clusters of houses are typical for Lower Mustang only. The following description of the two main temples of Lo Möntang, the Maitreya Temple (Jampa Lhakhang) and the Mahāmuni Temple (Tubchen Lhakhang) falls short of being comprehensible in this format without a deeper background in the subject or having seen the structures themselves, since the author focuses on their complex history of changes without describing their present state in detail first.

While it appears plausible that the Maitreya Temple once had a large assembly hall instead of the courtyard, the addition of the sculpture of Maitreya only in the 17th century certainly Christian Luczanits *Mustang Review* Aug 12, 2012 2 of 6 needs more backing. To me this is a rather a replacement, since the decoration on the upper levels does not indicate such a major change, and the absence of decoration on the ground level is hard to explain without the sculptures’ throne occupying most of its space. One also wonders about the concept of accommodations built on top of the respective assembly halls, which appear rather unlikely given the comparisons cited.

From the first two contributions it becomes clear that still very little is known on Mustang preceding the bloody conquests of Amepal (1388–1447) and his later Buddhist conversion, but there is considerable material evidence of an earlier period such as the remarkable stone panel of Green Tārā rescuing from the eight kinds of dangers that is preserved in the hermitage and cave temple of Tsug (Chuksang) in Lower Mustang, called the Mentsi Lhakhang. Lo Bue in his summary of the evidence on “Cave Hermitages and Chapels in Eastern Lo” follows the attribution of this temple to the 11th century Buddhist monk Künzang Logyal, and attributes the Tārā sculpture to that time. Further, the paintings of Buddha’s life in the temple are ascribed to the 11th–12th century (fig. 3.2). Lo Bue also shortly mentions the cave of Tashi Geling (see also Slusser and Bishop 1999), and surveys the Chödzung cave temple, the extensive documentation of which can be considered one of the highlights of this volume.

In my opinion, the Mentsi Lhakhang is strictly speaking more architecture than cave, with a single cell room built within an artificial cave that provides for the ambulatory. Also the front of the cave has been walled up. Further, both the oldest layer of painting (the life of the Buddha and the repeated Buddha images in the upper area of the wall) and the extant sculptural program have their comparisons in considerably later monuments than the dates suggested for them in this and previous publications. While it is true that the Buddha’s life carries

some indic features that appear to be earlier, the composition of the scenes against differently colored backgrounds to distinguish them and some of its details, such as the twisted turban like headdress ( and von der Heide 2011, fig. 8), rosettes above the ears (figure 3.2) and the leave shaped clouds are all features only becoming popular in the course of the 13th century (formore pictures of this cave see ( and von der Heide 2011). Also the repeated Buddhas above the sculptures are from approximately the same time. But even if we assume a 13th century date for the oldest murals, the original sculptures appear to be later than the paintings. More narrow dates for the paintings and sculptures can be suggested only with access to proper documentation and a detailed study of all remaining evidence.

Another early cave temple, that of Könchokling, is discussed in Luigi Fieni's contribution on the "Early Cave Paintings Rediscovered in Upper Lo", the historic name of this cave northeast of the capital Lo Mönthang not being known anymore. Hitting the media some years ago as the sensational discovery of 11th century paintings, this contribution gives a somewhat clearer idea of the monument and its content, but it fails to asses it properly in both architectural and art historical terms. Apparently based on a misreading of some of the inscriptions accompanying the Mahāsiddhas, among which erroneously both Sachen Künga Nyingpo and Sakya Pandita (1182–1251) are identified (p. 59), the paintings are cursorily attributed to the 13th century.

A visit to the cave in spring 2012 not only revealed factual mistakes in the description (such as the number of Mahāsiddhas on the left side of the cave, they are fifty-five in three rows of twice 19 and once 17 siddhas) but also yielded a much better understanding of the cave's iconographic program and the accompanying inscriptions. Here it may suffice to mention that Christian Luczanits Mustang Review Aug 12, 2012 3 of 6 the cave clearly has a Kagyupa context, the sixteen lineage figures preceding the practitioner (fig. 4.2) likely leading into the 14th century, that it once depicted the 85 Mahāsiddhas accompanied by verses of Vajrāsana (albeit in a slightly different variant), and that the succession and identification of many of the lineage figures and all of the Mahāsiddhas is indeed possible. However, due to unique elements in the iconography of the lineage and the unusual style fo the cave, it is not yet possible to suggest a more precise dating for its making. The rather cursory treatment of the figurative details and some of the motives, such as the scarf bound to the belt forming large loops and crossing the thighs, and the misunderstood belt (fig.4.4a is a great example) or the rather stiff representation of the tacher's cape, I tend to attribute the paintings to the early to mid 14th century.

The following contribution by Helmut F. and Heidi A. Neumann on the "Early Wall Paintings in Lo: Luri Reconsidered" is, as the title indicates, a reworked

version of an earlier article on this fascinating cave. This does, however, not mean that it is more complete in its description. While mentioning the eight deities of the base, only three are named and described, and only three of the four deities painted on the dome are mentioned. In the latter case, the fourth deity on the south side of the dome—a four-armed Mañjuśrī completing the set of the protectors of the three families—is correctly suggested towards the end of the article, the authors obviously missing the photographic documentation for it. It is also not mentioned that the mandala on the ceiling surrounded by the Mahāsiddhas is that of Akṣobhya.

In terms of attribution, the article replaces the more cautious assessments of the earlier publications with a tendency to the earliest possible date of the originally suggested range (Neumann 1994, 1997) without providing more evidence in this regard. There is no doubt, that Luri is earlier than the renovation paintings at Shalu, but the cave paintings are closer to those than to anything else. Nevertheless, no close relationship between the two monuments can be established since Luri is not a Sakyapa site, but most likely again a product of a Kagyu School, as shown not only by a lineage painted along the back wall, but also by the group of Mahāsiddhas that diverges from the Sakya tradition by representing Padmavajra instead of Virupa. A visit in 2012 allowed me to read the identifications of the lineage figures, but while the first name mentioned is indeed Marpa (as first mentioned in Alsop 2004, n. 2), the successive figures do not belong to any major lineage but more likely represent a local succession. Particular puzzling is the stiff and schematic representation of these teachers, each of them holding two lotus flowers in their teaching hands, a feature that otherwise only occurs in considerably later thanngkas (see Lieberman and Lieberman 2003, Luri Gompa).

The following two chapters then largely focus on the richest period of Mustang art in both murals and sculptures. The surprisingly massive Maitreya and Mahāmuni temples are the focus of Erberto LoBue's chapter on the "Wonders of Mōntang", the name referring to the tiny fortified capital of the Upper Mustang region. Constructed and decorated during the 15th century, they are to be counted among the most important monuments throughout the Himalayas. This chapter, referring to illustrations throughout the book and exceptionally well referenced, shortly summarizes the historic context and iconographic program of the two monuments. Sadly, there is no ground plan of the monuments or any other visual key that lets a reader not familiar with them understand the iconographic programs described. Christian Luczanits Mustang Review Aug 12, 2012 4 of 6 The Mahāmuni temple certainly has not been fully understood, as its explanation does not take the lost right side wall into account. As described, the left side wall does preserve five Buddhas in monastic robes performing the gestures of the five transcendental

Buddhas as the central group. If we assume that these were mirrored on the other side, this group of ten Buddhas most likely represents the Buddhas of the Ten Directions. Such a composition is not only known from other, later monuments in Mustang, but also from the mid-11th-century paintings in the Tabo Main Temple. More puzzling is the decoration in the main part of the monument, especially if there have originally only been three Buddhas along the main wall (all sculptures of the temple as preserved today are later additions). If there were five Buddhas on the main wall, then the most likely composition would be a central Śākyamuni flanked by the Eight Medicine Buddhas, which include Śākyamuni again. This would explain why Śākyamuni also appears in the left side corner of the temple surrounded by the sixteen arhats.

Amy Heller's contribution on "Portable Buddhist Sculpture of Lo: A Chronological Selection, 15th to 17th Centuries" brings together a remarkable group of inscribed and partially dated bronzes with connection to the region. Mostly portraits or sculptures made in connection with prominent Buddhist teachers of the region, the partly large size images are highly remarkable for their quality. Providing transliterations and translations of the inscriptions this study is the most substantial contribution of the volume.

The remaining essays are brought together under the heading restoration and revival. First Luigi Fieni focuses on "The Restoration of Murals in the Maitreya Temple of Möntang", but actual information on the restoration itself is only provided in the final part of the text, which otherwise presents a cursory description of the temple's decoration and the observed painting technique. While the latter contains some interesting details, such as the diverse stratification layers, it lacks any reference to a scientific base for the statements. The described painting technology appears less sophisticated than is to be expected from its appearance. The restoration itself is shortly summarized at the end, and the extensive retouching (see below) that obviously took place and is most apparent in figure 8.4 is not mentioned at all (for prerestoration photographs see Lieberman and Lieberman 2003).

The same authors' discussion of the "The Restoration of Murals in the Mahāmuni Temple of Möntang", is essentially structured the same way, but begins with stating the employment of locals in the restoration project, which explains two pictures of the previous chapter (figures 8.9 and 8.10). Again, the explanations of the technique and the restoration work remain very general only, but it does emphasize the sophisticated technique the paintings are done with.

When visiting the temples for the first time in 2010, I was surprised by the extensive amount of painting the restoration of the temples involves, even more so as to my knowledge no in depth study of the murals has been done so far. My subsequent visit in 2012 confirmed that the amount of painting done in the two

monuments, but in particular in the Maitreya temple, is—from a scholarly and historical perspective—misguided and has obscured many iconographic details that were still visible before repainting. While this is less severe in the case of the ambulatory of the ground floor (figures 6.1, 8.2, 8.4), the third floor paintings on the three fully repainted walls have practically become illegible in their details (figure 8.6). Even on the more cautiously restored second floor (figures 6.2, 8.8, 8.12) major iconographic mistakes—such as an alteration of the main figure of a Vairocana mandala on the right side wall of the temple against Christian Luczanits Mustang Review Aug 12, 2012 5 of 6 the earlier documented appearance and remaining traces—have been introduced through the restoration. It is thus clear, that any future in depth study of the monument fully depends on pre-restoration documentation. In this connection, it is also interesting to note that the color palette of the newly painted sections in the ground floor (in particular figures 6.1 and 8.2) reminds more of contemporaneous Newari thangka paintings reproducing an older style than of a 15th century color palette. It can only be hoped that the on site discussions with the leading restorer and representatives of the Chode Monastery and the foundation financing the restoration leads to a more cautious restoration approach in future work.

Chiara Bellini in her contribution on “Bönpo and Buddhist Art in 20th-century Lo” then focuses on an other aspect of revival, the traditional re-decoration or rebuilding of monuments. Her article almost exclusively focuses on describing the iconographic program of a number of temples, the most detailed ones being two Bönpo monuments in Lubrak. While I agree that the relationship to the ancientness of a work of sculpture or painting does not play a major role in the local culture, I would contest that it only means “something out of date or simply old” (p.135). Not accidentally, the main clay sculpture of the temple of Püntsokling in Lubra (figure 10.1) was refurbished, as can be seen from the uneven surfaces, and not redone. It would have been great, if this contribution would also have considered the context of the new decorations, the process that led to the choice of the artist and the iconographic program depicted. In my opinion, monuments and decorations of the 20th century have as much a history to be proven as more ancient ones.

In the final contribution the conservation architect Maie Kitamura considers “Reviving a Sacred Place: The Hermitage of Samdrupling” from an architectural point of view. She presents a well conceived concept-plan for the revival of that site as a hermitage that includes the present day ruins and present day needs. To me some of her suggestions would also be perfectly suitable for the construction of environment friendly tourist accommodations. To my knowledge the revival of the hermitage of Samdrupling remains a project only.

The book concludes with a list of Tibetan terms and their proper transcription,

a two page index, and short biographies of the contributors. A bibliography of all sources cited and used would have been useful.

The heritage of Mustang, thus, still provides plenty of opportunity for further exploration. The oldest paintings in the region—exclusively preserved in caves and dating to the 13th and 14th centuries—await a more precise and comprehensive assessment, also in terms of their relative chronology and function. Each of the large temples of Lo Möntang offers a broad range of issues for further exploration, most important among them the original iconographic program and a rereading and reevaluation of the inscriptions, which at least partly have to be done with prerestoration documentation. Beyond these, there are a number of other monuments throughout the region that would deserve scholarly attention, such as the Gonpa Khang temple opposite Chuksang, not mentioned at all in the reviewed publication.

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